



Millions vs. Billions

Posted by **Pierluigi Oliverio** on Monday, February 04, 2008

City Hall Diary

At the General Plan Task Force meeting last week, we discussed transportation and how future VTA projects will guide San Jose's land use. The VTA budget for new projects is funded out of the voter-approved half-cent sales tax. The tax provides partial funding for BART, light rail extension, bus rapid transit improvements, some road paving, trails and bike lanes.

The big-ticket item is BART. The low estimate to bring BART to San Jose is \$5 billion, but some say the amount is closer to \$10 billion. Whether you are a BART cheerleader or a skeptic, one thing both sides agree on: BART is a huge investment. It is fair to say that BART will at least have a \$1 billion overrun and that the \$200 million that is budgeted for trails and bike lanes alone will not close the gap on the BART shortfall.

Trails and bike lanes are two of the most important transportation options available to us. They are the smallest items in terms of funding on the "to do" list at \$200 million, versus \$5 billion plus for BART. I have had many different forums in my district where residents are constantly asking me about trails and bike lanes. These residents ask how they can help with grant writing, private/public partnerships, etc.

I ask myself: Why not spend the money on trails and bike lanes first since the money needed is much less than any other transportation options like BART? In addition, the talent that can be gained by working with volunteers and the community would be an asset for the VTA, city and county in our goals for trails and bike lanes.

One caveat with trail land is that for the city and county to get its best value, we must purchase land now because land appreciates in value. Trails can be expensive at around \$1million a mile. However, in comparison, BART is around \$500 million a mile, with an estimated completion of no sooner than 2017.

Another form of transportation discussed was the bus rapid transit lines. In addition to special preference at traffic signals, these buses travel major routes and have fewer stops. However, I would encourage that ALL the buses are equipped with real time GPS information. For example, the bus stop would have a display that would communicate to waiting passengers how many minutes till the next bus arrives. The GPS system has already been successful in Europe and many US cities today. Instead of passengers having to guess what time a bus will arrive by looking down the street from the gutter, they would simply look at the display. This would bring a higher level of consumer satisfaction and increase the number of bus riders.

I think it is prudent to pick off the lower hanging fruit for transportation projects while keeping an eye on the big picture.

What do you think?

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